

Not what the founders intended

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During the last few years, there has been much debate in Congress over earmarking, which is the process of designating funds for a specific purpose in a spending bill. Critics of the practice call most of these earmarks "pork barrel projects." Members of both parties use the practice in order to secure funds for their districts and proudly point them out during their next campaign to prove they are in Washington to "bring home the bacon." Leadership of parties in Congress will often use earmarks to entice members to vote a certain position on legislation. The 2003 expansion of Medicare and the 2007 emergency spending bill for Iraq are both examples of this practice.

"Earmarking isn't subject to competitive bidding, congressional hearings, proper oversight or authorizations," says Andrew Roth with the Club for Growth, a non-profit group dedicated to lower taxes and limited government.

The lack of oversight ultimately leads to corruption, as we have seen in recent years through the scandals of former Congressman Duke Cunningham and former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who called the House Appropriations Committee a "favor factory."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) defends the process saying, "The Founding Fathers would be cringing to hear people talking about eliminating earmarks."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

President James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, explicitly rejected what we would consider to be pork barrel spending when he vetoed the Bonus Bill of 1817, which would have spent revenues from the Second Bank of the United States on "internal improvements."

"The legislative powers vested in Congress are specified and enumerated in the eighth section of the first article of the Constitution, and it does not appear that the power proposed to be exercised by the bill is among the enumerated powers, or that it falls by any just interpretation with the power to make laws necessary and proper for carrying into execution those or other powers vested by the Constitution in the Government of the United States," wrote Madison in his veto message to Congress.

He added, "To refer the power in question to the clause 'to provide for common defense and general welfare' would be contrary to the established and consistent rules of interpretation."

Earmarking, in its current form, is a fairly recent phenomenon. According to Citizens Against Government Waste, earmarks were not used extensively until the 1980s. In 1991, there were 546 earmarks totaling \$3.1 billion. By 2005, there were nearly 14,000 earmarks at a cost of \$27.3 billion. The number of earmarks decreased in 2006, but the total cost of the earmarks actually went up to \$29 billion.

The most well-known earmark is the Gravina Island Bridge in Ketchikan, Alaska, which is more commonly referred to as the Bridge to Nowhere. The bridge was part of the pork-laden 2005 highway bill.

This \$223 million pork project, supported by Senator Ted Stevens, would have replaced a ferry that transports some of Gravina Island's 50 residents (yes, 50) to the mainland in Ketchikan, which is home to Alaska's second largest airport.

Stevens threatened to resign from the Senate when the project was threatened. The funding remained for Alaska, but the specific earmark for the bridge was removed. Alaska's newly elected Governor, Sarah Palin, killed the project last year.

Congressman Jeff Flake, a Republican from Arizona, has targeted many earmarks through a series of amendments to spending bills. He has sought to strip funding for ridiculous earmarks such as \$50,000 for the National Mule and Packers Museum in California, \$200,000 for the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, Mo., and \$150,000 for the South Carolina Aquarium in Charleston, S.C.

Earmarks are an issue for several reasons. They can distort the marketplace, allowing the government to pick winners and losers. More often than not, the cost of an earmark is greater than the benefit, something that is especially true with mass transit projects.

There also is not much public support for the practice. According to a CBS News poll conducted last year, 67 percent of the public viewed earmarks as "not acceptable."

Both Democratic Party candidates for the presidency have attempted to raid the public purse for their states. According to "The Hill," Senator Barack Obama sought \$98 million in earmarks in 2007 to Senator Hillary Clinton's \$342 million. Obama has received more than \$200 million in earmarks since 2005, including a \$1 million earmark for University of Chicago Medical Center where his wife is employed. Clinton has not publicly released her earmark requests for previous years. One of her earmarks made the news last year when she attempted to secure \$1 million for a "hippie museum" to commemorate Woodstock, a project being pushed by a donor to her campaign.

Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee for President, has made no requests for earmarks in recent years. However, he is in the minority in his party.

To their credit, Obama and Clinton did join McCain in backing a year long moratorium on earmarks in the Senate. However, that measure overwhelmingly failed.

Four Congressmen from Georgia - Paul Broun, Nathan Deal, Tom Price and Lynn Westmoreland - have publicly taken a pledge not to seek nor sponsor an earmark for one year. Some Republicans believe the party lost control of Congress in 2006 because of the abandonment of fiscally conservative principles and the record level of pork spending by a GOP controlled Congress. I will submit to you that this is very true to an extent. Republicans, despite their best efforts, cannot completely dismiss an unpopular war in Iraq as a part of their electoral struggles, but I digress.

According to the Club for Growth, 37 members of House and seven members of the Senate have taken the pledge and it is not exclusive to either party.

One member that should be added to that list is Congressman John Linder, who represents the northern tip of Newton County. Linder's office confirmed to me while researching for this article that he is not seeking any earmarks this year.

I challenge Congressman Jim Marshall to add his name to the list of members abstaining from earmarks. Marshall, who represents the majority of Newton County, is certainly no stranger to the process. He received \$6.5 million in earmarks last year alone.

Democrats have promised transparency in the process, but not much has changed. Real reform is needed that will put these projects out in the open so that taxpayers know how their hard earned money is being spent by their representatives. I would argue that real reform is ending the practice all together.